

Five

Draft for All Saints Chapter Discussion

Sacrament: Mystery and Meaning

They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread. Acts 2:42c

We should be regarded as people . . . entrusted with the mysteries of God. I Corinthians 4:1a, c¹

Language plays a crucial role in sculpting meaning from our lived experience. Language is not an individual undertaking; we inherit a whole forest of words and meanings. Much like our experience with a forest, we are aware of only the most apparent parts of it, unaware of interconnections beneath the surface, and even less aware of the “sensing” taking place among its many components. In addition to the language that we learn from our first care givers and the communities in which we grow up, language is a part of the forest of meanings into which we are grafted by groups of which we are a part. We are largely unaware of how a word has come to mean what it does, and its deeper meanings go unnoticed until we dig into its interactions.

Rather than investigating the meaning of the sacraments of baptism and eucharist, let’s start with the question: what do Lukans mean when we use the word “sacrament?” The word *sacramentum* is not a word used in the Greek New Testament at all. It was used in early Latin translations from Carthage to translate the Greek *mysterion*, a practice continued by Jerome in the Vulgate. The Latin word *mysterium* was also available and continued to be used by these translators as well. We’d like to know why they chose to use words for sacrament rather than mystery, but the honest answer is “we don’t know.”

One possibility, which also aids us in understanding our use of the word “mystery”, is that the prevalence of mystery religions at that time might have caused persons to think that the mystery the Christians were talking about was similar to that of those religions. For the Greco-Roman mystery cults, the mysteries were closely guarded secrets. In contrast, Paul writes of “making known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19).” Although hidden in past ages, this mystery is now made manifest publicly (Romans 16:25-26, Ephesians 3:1-6). This contrast between concealment and open proclamation may have contributed to the choice of the word *sacramentum*.

While *mysterion* continued to be used in the East for what we think of as the sacraments, liturgical and theological writings in the West increasingly use *sacramentum*.² While these two words are not equivalent, our sculpting of meaning is enriched by remembering their inter-relationship.³ How are we to understand and appropriate the depth dynamics of this grove of meanings for the word sacrament?

¹ NIB

² My computer’s autocorrect always corrects *Mysterion* so that it begins with a capital M, indicative of its common use for “The Mysteries” in the Eastern Churches (parallel to “The Sacraments” in the West).

³For a discussion of *mysterion* and *sacramentum*, see Browning and Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy* (*op. cit.*), pp. 26-64.

Sign, Symbol and Sacrament

Paul Tillich's distinction between signs and symbols is a helpful place to start.⁴ *Signs* point to something. They "de-sign-ate" what we are thinking and talking about. They can be replaced by other words as long as we define them. Some things and the words we use for them, however, have a dynamic relationship with that toward which they point. A wedding ring is not just a ring; it signifies the marriage. A flag can signify a country. When the concept behind a word conveys this kind of relationship we call it a symbol.

Bernard Cooke understands symbols to be the kind of signs that not only point to something beyond themselves but that, through knowing them, lead us to know something more. While signs point clearly and directly to something else, "a symbol touches not only direct knowing but also emotions and memory and imagination."⁵ When we greet a good friend with a hug after a long separation, he observes, "it says many things, not all of which can be translated into words."⁶

Symbols exist on a continuum from simple, as in the examples above, to deep and complex concepts like Sacrament. In addition to symbols participating in that toward which they point, Tillich says they also "open us up to levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us."⁷ We have a dynamic participation with that toward which a symbol points. Most of us are aware of the distinction Martin Buber makes between I-It and I-Thou relationships.⁸ We have been taught that we should treat people as "Thou's" to be cared about and not as "It's" to be manipulated. That ethic is relevant to many critiques of contemporary culture. However, it is Buber's understanding of an I-Thou relationship with a tree which I find helpful in our understanding of Sacrament.

At the gate to our mountain cabin in the Paha Sapa of South Dakota, the lane leads through a beautiful grove of aspens. When we first camped there some fifty years ago, only three mother trees were still standing. The saplings were eaten off each year by range cattle. When we fenced off the area, the aspen began to spread and grow tall. Now it is a lovely grove.

Sometimes (like the cattle!) I treat the grove as an "it" to be manipulated. I cut down a tree that's in my way or remove a baby sapling from the lane. However, there are other times when I see it from our deck and am "seized" (the word is Buber's) by its sheer beauty, in awe of its interconnectedness beneath the surface, its resurrection after years of abuse.⁹ It becomes a "Thou." Generations of my students have protested: "But you can't hear it speaking." "Have you listened?" I responded. "How do we learn the language of trees?" At which point, other

⁴ A cautionary note: Sometimes the word "sign" carries the additional meaning we will restrict to the word symbol. Note how any writer or speaker is defining these terms.

⁵ Bernard J. Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1968; ©1952 by Paul Tillich), p. 42. See chapter III for a more complete statement of Tillich's position.

⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Second ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958,

⁹ Op. cit, p. 7.

students would commence teaching about how trees “speak” to them! If a grove of trees doesn’t work for you, try a sunset, or a beautiful work of art, or a mountain landscape. The object of our experiencing can become a “Thou.” Sometimes that happens on our first encounter; sometimes only after we have come to understand its interrelationships and history more deeply; sometimes only as our appreciation grows. Our response may be both affective and cognitive, but we tend to still think of ourselves as the primary actor: “I never noticed that before.” “I’ve learned to see art in a new way.”

Some symbols are like that. However, sometimes we feel that we are grasped by something beyond ourselves, our experiencing penetrated by something outside the self. This is not created by mechanical cause and effect. It is relational. Not only is it interactive, but in that relation we experience the primacy of grace. We posit that there is a Giver beyond ourselves; our experiencing is penetrated with potentials for meaning from “beyond.” In our grove of meanings, we name that Giver “God”, and that which is given which brings with it relationship with the Giver, we call “holy”. Such symbols are sacraments.

Sacrament, Louis-Marie Chauvet insists, should not be understood in a quasi-mechanical fashion. Rather it is a way in which we can encounter and experience the Transcendent. This doesn’t happen directly; it can be mediated through language, ritual, and community. Chauvet says that in functioning like language, sacrament doesn’t just point to reality, it performs and constitutes it. For example, baptism doesn’t just signify membership in the household of faith, it creates it by the ritual act. Through ritual, the Church enters into the paschal mystery of which we have written. Grace is not a thing to be transferred, but a relationship that emerges from participating in the sacrament.¹⁰

James F. White, as well as Chauvet and many others, uses the metaphor of gift to help us understand sacrament.¹¹ Sacrament is given, a gift. Understood anthropologically, a gift requires, or at least expects, a return gift, even if that is only a thank you, and this is where we must be careful.¹² For, as David N. Power points out, when used as an analogy for sacrament, the emphasis must be on the giving. The purpose is to create relationship with the other. It doesn’t require a return gift that obscures the distance between the surplus of grace in the gift that erases the recognition of “otherness.” The relationship is not created by “giving back” but in receiving gratefully and moving forward into an enhanced life realized in the future. The Giver who remains mystery “addresses the one on whom the gift is bestowed, calling forth a response.”¹³ The Giver is beyond definition, indeed beyond comprehension, even though we are apprehended by recognizing we have received a gift.

Here we are brought back to *mysterion*. A cautionary note: sometimes the word mystery is used as an excuse for not thinking about something difficult to understand. That is not the way in which the word is used here. When we ponder the meaning and use the words and images which best communicate our lived experience, and find that there is a dimension still deeper, still

¹⁰ See Chauvet’s *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, MN, The Liturgical Press, 1995,) especially chapters four and nine. This monumental work is thorough and comprehensive and these brief comments are only suggestive of the larger contributions of the book.

¹¹ *Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving* (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1983)

¹² For example, Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*. Trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Routledge, 1990).

¹³David N. Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God’s Giving* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1999) p. 280.

“beyond” what we can articulate, then we can call it “mystery”. Before it was appropriated by Christianity, the concept was used in Greek religious writings. Literally, it means closing one’s mouth or lips. When we are grasped by the holy that is beyond us, our sense of awe carries with it the recognition that there is no way we can adequately talk about it. “There just aren’t words” are the words we use!! On the other hand, we can’t keep quiet about it either. We write poems and hymns and reflections and create stained glass windows and rituals and liturgies to point the way to that for which we don’t have words adequate for the task.

In Luke, we read of “the mysteries of the kingdom of God.”¹⁴ For Paul, mystery refers to something kept secret that is now revealed, to God’s wisdom, and to the great mystery of Christ and the Church.¹⁵ While these examples (from the twenty-eight times the word *mysterion* appears in the New Testament) cover a variety of things, they all have to do with the act of God in Jesus the Christ. This good news is to be proclaimed, not concealed from all but the initiated.

In the West, the word “sacrament” came to be increasingly used. Coming from the Latin *sacer + mentum*, it literally meant making sacred or consecrating. However, language doesn’t stand still. It accumulates meanings to serve our needs and the more profound and important the concept is, the more lush the grove of meanings becomes. As my first wife Sr. Linda and I worked on an earlier book, we came to the following understanding of Sacrament.

A sacrament embodies how we belong to God and one another¹⁶ (Romans 14:7-8). It sets forth God’s self-giving love. Sacrament can involve sign acts, involving physical elements, action, and interpretive words, which express God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ through the Spirit and which express the church’s response in faith, hope, and love. This response can transform human lives and relationships. Our understanding of Sacrament is grounded in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and presence of Jesus Christ, that is, the paschal mystery.

A sacrament involves what is both *hidden* and *revealed*. It opens us to see what is otherwise hidden. As we have seen, this is not a secret known only to the initiated. It is good news proclaimed and available to everyone. A sacrament is *perceived* (by our senses) it involves something we can see, touch, taste and or hear. But it also *received*, being beyond what we sense. Sacrament has to do with both *gift* from an extravagant Giver and the *response* of opening ourselves to the presence of the Transcendent One in transforming ways that carry us into a new life in the future.¹⁷

A sacrament also has to do with both the *immanent* (that is, it is embodied and present in the world we experience) and the *transcendent* (that is, it is related to the mystery of God who we understand as being beyond our concepts and our language). My own thinking in regard to this connection was enriched early in my academic life by studying the thought of Karl Jaspers, a

¹⁴ Luke 8:10. See also Mark 4:11.

¹⁵Romans 16:25, I Corinthians 2:7, Ephesians 5:32. See also Colossians 2:2 and 4:3 and I Corinthians 15:51.

¹⁶ See Romans 14:7-8.

¹⁷ Adapted from Dwight W. Vogel and Linda J. Vogel, *Sacramental Living* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999), pp. 17-25.

German existentialist philosopher.¹⁸ He uses the term “The Encompassing” (*das Umgreifende*) to refer to what encompasses all thought and existence, including both subject and object, yet which can never be fully grasped as an object of knowledge. However, we can and do think and talk about that transcendence. How? Jaspers employs the notion of ciphers (*Chiffren*) to refer to the indirect way the Encompassing is related to our thinking.¹⁹

In early use, the word “cipher” referred to zero. Like a mathematical zero, a cipher (as its meaning developed and we are using the word) points to something that can’t be directly grasped but is essential. The word came to refer to a key that could decipher or unlock a mysterious code. Like these cryptographic codes, ciphers must be interpreted; however, unlike codes they have no definitive key, being *meaningful yet mysterious*. We started our meaning-making reflections about Sacrament by tracing the conceptual journey from sign to symbol to those symbols that point beyond themselves to the Transcendent. Another word enabling us to look through a slightly different lens is the word Jaspers used: *Encompassing*. It is a term for what we posit as encompassing all, both what we know and what we don’t know, both what is transcendent and what is immanent, including our experiences and our concepts. The term stands for the ineffable--the beyond that cannot be fully expressed in words. Yet, just as with Transcendence, we can think and talk about Encompassing as something which is both meaning full, with an incredible matrix of meanings, and also a mystery.

We do not create the language and culture into which we are born, though in sculpting meaning we may contribute new terms and concepts to it. We inherit a whole forest of intersecting words and concepts, some of which point to the mystery above and beyond them. Thus, history and language can be ciphers which give us tools for apprehending what we cannot comprehend. Some of those ciphers are contained within religious traditions which transmit narratives and words and concepts which carry both mystery and meaning.

As we reflect on what Sacrament means for us, we tap into how the Christian tradition provides terms and concepts which enrich our understanding. The term most commonly used to refer to the Transcendent or the Encompassing in our tradition is the word God. We will look briefly at a key way to understand how we talk about God²⁰

We can identify with Moses in his experience at the burning bush (recorded in Exodus 3:1-14) who asks the Transcendent One: “what is your name?” Moses has learned that his encounter is with the same god called upon by his ancestors. We accept that too. We are not talking with or about a generalized concept of deity but with God (note we now capitalize the word to indicate we have moved from multiple gods to one God, our God, the God we have learned about from our tradition). The name revealed to Moses in this narrative is YHWH. If we try to read that aloud we discover we don’t know how to say this sacred name. It is unpronounceable and I choose to think that’s intentional. God’s name is beyond pronunciation just as God is beyond our concept of God. The name we use is a cipher pointing beyond itself. The editorial team working on *A Lukan Psalter* faced this

¹⁸ Dwight W. Vogel, *The Philosophy of Religion of Karl Jaspers*, M.A. thesis, Boston University, 1962.

¹⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*. While the material that follows makes use of his terminology and concepts, the application to Sacrament which follows should not be attributed to him but to me.

²⁰ These are not at all unique to a Lukan perspective but are one way that “fits” with our spirituality.

challenge. How were we to refer to the sacred name of God. Let me share some of what we learned and what we decided.²¹

YHWH is the sacred, covenant name of God, often designated as “the tetragrammaton” (“four letters”).²² We inherit an understanding of the name YHWH which carries the rich meaning of One whose “is-ness” in the past, the present and the future is actively and passionately present for us and all creation. It evokes a sense of both transcendence and personal relationship, both meaning and mystery.

We chose to render YHWH as ADONAI rather than LORD, because in contemporary English usage, the word LORD carries cultural baggage from feudal times that could cause us to understand the divine name incorrectly, even negatively, as sexist or imperialist, and to miss the rich meaning of YHWH as the covenant name of the God of Israel. Likewise, in response to the call for inter-religious understanding and sensitivity inherent in a Lukan spirituality, the team wished to identify with those of our Jewish brothers and sisters who pronounce YHWH as ADONAI. When *Adonai* (rather than YHWH) occurs in the Hebrew text in reference to God, it is rendered in English using lower case as “Adonai.” As it was for the early church, the referent is often ambiguous, pointing to either (or both) God and/or Christ. It was partly out of the experience of such language that the Church’s understanding of Christology and of “the holy and blessed Trinity” emerged.

In the Order we often, though not always, use ADONAI for the sacred name.²³ We want the name to point beyond itself (as a cipher or a sacramental symbol does). Our limited language seeks to evoke a sense of both transcendence and a personal relationship with our covenant God, pointing to One whose “is-ness” is actively and passionately present for us and all creation, as well as the One to whom we owe allegiance as we respond to the invitation: “Come, follow me.”

In trying to find a way to talk about such terms as God, Transcendence and the Encompassing, we experience the need for a concept like Sacrament. This can be used for sacraments (like baptism and eucharist, and in a different but related sense, concepts and names for the beyond). These serve as ciphers for that toward which they point and in which they participate with both meaning and mystery. Some will see them as ways in which Transcendence communicates with human existence. For them, the word “revelation” refers to how the unknown beyond is somehow and somewhat made known. Others, especially sensitive to the need for humility in what they know about the beyond, will speak of gaining insight. Both, however, involve meaning and mystery.

Let us look at some of these sacraments and see how this matrix of meanings for the concept of Sacrament applies. First, we will look at what I call foundational sacraments. Then, in more familiar territory, we will do a brief survey of the sacraments of the Church,

²¹ OSL Publications, 2020. The material that follows is adapted from “How We Talk to and About God,” pp. 24-25.

²²We were greatly assisted here by our consultations with Sr. Cheryl Anne Brown, OSL, Ph.D., whose scholarly background in the Hebrew Language as well as Judaism and early Christianity was invaluable to us.

²³ Note that there is no prohibition on pronouncing YHWH as Yahweh or Jehovah in services of the Order.

and finally present a reflection on an understanding that moves from Sacrament to sacramentality and back again.

Foundational Sacraments

There are four uses of the word “sacrament” which may seem surprising. These uses do not have to do with the “traditional” sacraments of Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox Churches. I call them “foundational sacraments” because they help me understand what undergirds not only baptism and eucharist but sacramental living in general.

I begin by reflecting on Theodore Runyon’s observation that the world is the “original sacrament.”²⁴ Implicit are meaning making affirmations that creation is itself an act of grace, that the creation is essentially good and not evil, and that through the creation, we can glimpse the Transcendent. As I write this chapter, I am surrounded by the beauty of the mountains of western South Dakota. The wind in the pines and the rushing stream across the road can be heard through the open window. A spring sparkles cold and clear behind our cabin, and we see deer and elk and antelope on early morning drives. On clear nights, when there is no human light in sight, we can gaze into the glory of the heavens.

Now none of these sights and sounds are sacramental in and of themselves. Indeed, for some they are not sacramental at all because there is no wonder in them, and for others, they are not sacramental because in and of themselves they become the objects of worship. But for me — not always, but on more than a few occasions — the veil is torn away, the aperture is opened, and I become filled with awe for the Transcendent One who is above all, and through all, and in all.²⁵ So called “primitive peoples” without the benefit of “revealed theology” often have this sense in deep and profound ways. We might call it prevenient grace, the grace that goes before and prepares the way, but is grace none-the-less.

It is out of this innate goodness of creation, and the potential of creation to carry a sense of that which is beyond it, that water and oil and bread and wine can be seen as “vehicles of grace”— elements whose *sign*-ificance is profound for those who look with the eyes of faith. So Paul Tillich writes:

The universal religious basis is the experience of the Holy within the finite. Universally in everything finite and particular, or in this and that finite, the Holy appears in a special way. I could call this the sacramental basis of all religions — the holy here and now which can be seen, heard, dealt with, in spite of its mysterious character.²⁶

²⁴ Theodore Runyon, “The World as the Original Sacrament,” *Worship* 54 (1980), pp. 495-511.

²⁵ See Ephesians 4:6. The theological nature of this perspective is explored by W. Paul Jones in *Theological Worlds* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 11-121.

²⁶ Paul Tillich, in *The Future of Religions*, Jerald C. Brauer ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 87.

If the world is the “original sacrament” of God’s grace, Edward Schillebeeckx makes it clear that “the man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is the “primordial sacrament.”²⁷ We recall the importance of the paschal mystery in our discussion of the apostolic hope. Christian sacramental living needs to be based in this fundamental recognition of Jesus as the primordial sacrament of God’s grace for us. Indeed, it is because of that sense, however expressed, that the man Jesus of Nazareth becomes Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Lord, Jesus the Child of God.

The third of these “foundational sacraments,” as I have chosen to call them, is the Church itself as a sacrament of salvation. For Schillebeeckx, “[w]hat God’s grace, [God’s] absolute, gratuitous and forgiving proximity has already begun to do in the lives of all [persons] becomes an *epiphany* in the Church. . . . The Church is the primordial sacrament of the salvation of all . . .”²⁸ It is also a sacrament of salvation, a sacrament of God’s grace and a sacrament of Christ’s presence. A depth understanding of the Church as the Living Body of Christ (in which Christ’s real presence is in the *koinonia*) is inherently sacramental.

Karl Rahner ties all three perspectives together:

Sacraments point not just to *things* through which the Holy can be revealed. Rather, all of nature and history reveal the cosmic grace of God to which the individual sacraments are witnesses and expressions. God’s grace is bringing wholeness and salvation at the roots of human experience. . . . God’s cosmic, essential grace is visible in many ways, but supremely in Jesus Christ, the primordial sacrament, and in the Church, the presently *visible*, ministering, caring, serving body of Christ.²⁹

Creation, Jesus and the Church are foundational theologically. Whether implicit or explicit, recognition of their sacramentality undergirds depth understandings of the sacramental acts of the Church. The connection between these foundational sacraments and the sacraments of the Church can be seen in James White’s affirmation that “God’s self-giving is the basis of the Christian sacraments. . . . God gives us sacraments as a continual means of manifesting God’s love for us.”³⁰

To these I must add one more foundational sacrament and I can best do that by inviting you to join me on a hike around Bear Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park, a hike that Linda and I

²⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 151. Jesus as primordial sacrament is a view also developed by Karl Rahner in *Christ and the Sacraments* (NY: Herder and Herder, 1960) and Bernard Cooke in *Sacrament and Sacramentality* Revised ed. (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994).

²⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Mission of the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 17.

²⁹ Karl Rahner, as summarized by Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1985), p. 11.

³⁰ James F. White, *Sacraments as God’s Self-Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), pp. 13, 23.

took with Bernard Cooke and his wife, Pauline. We were discussing how to help students understand the sacramental in a more relational way.

"I'm convinced," Bernard said, "that we need to recognize that the most basic sacrament of God's saving presence to human life is the sacrament of human love and friendship."³¹ We talked about how our experience of loving relationship with our wives, Pauline and Linda, had opened up for each of us insights into how we understand God, the loving Giver. Put another way, "the sacramentality of human love and friendship touches the most basic level of this revelation . . . through human beings being persons for one another."³²

I had already named this in terms of my relationship with my beloved, but Bernard was unwilling to let it be that exclusive. Human beings were created to be, he believed, a "word" revealing to us God's self-giving in proportion to the depth of their "communion with one another."³³ He put it this way: "Humans and their relationships are a "word" that is being constantly created by God. In this word, God is made present to us revealing divine selfhood through the sacramentality of our human experience of one another."³⁴ We are able to trust that the ultimate (we may call it the Transcendent or the Encompassing or God) is "infinitely caring, compassionate and concerned" and the only way we are able to begin to grasp "such an incredible thing" is "our experience of loving concern and compassion in our human relationships."³⁵

I remember his illustration of the hug between friends after an absence which says more than the words they exchange. To accept graciously the gift of grace in our relations with others "makes it possible for us to see our lives as a gift from a lovingly providential God."³⁶ To see this as sacramental, however, does more than enable us to trust that God loves us. It *embodies* God's loving self-giving. We gain this insight, which we recognize more and more as a revelation, even in relationships where it is only made known through momentary glimpses, ciphers of the possible. We know it more fully in friendships which may be brief in time but of great depth. We live more fully by its assurance in long lasting relationships for which we give thanks, for its potential in siblings who share vows we have taken, and in those who sing God's song of grace to us. As I reflect on Lukan spirituality, the basic sacrament of friendship is part of the matrix of meanings emerging when I reflect on the meaning of Sacrament.

The Depth Dynamic of Sacramentality

In our identifying creation as a primordial sacrament and friendship as a basic sacrament, we have expanded the matrix of meanings surrounding Sacrament to include sacramentality. Incarnational theology implicit in the paschal mystery as we examined it, leads to a much wider view of what can have dimensions of sacramentality. However, as we considered the meaning

³¹ To ensure accuracy in sharing Bernard's thinking, I will rely here, not on my own memory alone, but on his writing in *Sacraments & Sacramentality* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-third Publications, ©1994, 1983 by Bernard J. Cooke), pp. 80-83. When I first read these pages, I said to Linda: "That's what we talked about at Bear Lake!"

³² Cooke, op. cit, p. 80-81. Notice the intentional use of "insight" and "revelation" to name the same experience.

³³ Op cit., p. 82.

³⁴ Op. cit, p. 83.

³⁵ Op. cit., p. 84.

³⁶ Ibid.

we inherit in the name of God the Giver toward which sacraments point, we discovered that far from being a mysterious abstraction lacking meaning upon which to ground our living, it has rich and relevant meaning for our lives. What is the depth dynamic in this grove of meanings interpenetrating the roots of all the trees that emerge in our search for meaning that preserves mystery?

I first encountered the concept of the Hebrew word *hesed* in an assignment to do a word study when I was in seminary. I turned to it often in teaching courses in Bible and theology. It emerged again as we worked on a Lukan psalter, for it appears one hundred and twenty-seven times in the book of psalms. The richness and mystery of the word can be seen in the variety of ways in which it has been translated, including mercy, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, love, loving kindness, unfailing love, faithful love, as well as the one we chose: steadfast love.³⁷

I believe that a Lukan spirituality has this understanding of God's love for us at its core. What is the ancient text saying when *hesed* is used? In the Hebrew Bible, *hesed* always occurs within the context of covenant (Heb: *b'rit*). It is the primary expression of God's covenant relationship with God's people and the covenant relationship of God's people with each other. It does not refer to "love" in general, but rather to love rooted in, stemming from, and expressing a *relationship*, specifically, a covenant relationship both between God and God's people and also between the participants in that covenant.

The narrative of Hebrew scripture takes us to Mt. Sinai for what we often call the Mosaic Covenant. Its structure, in Exodus 20-24 and 33-34, follows closely that of other ancient Near Eastern contracts or treaties, in that it encompasses both a "vertical" relationship (that is, between God and God's people) and a "horizontal" relationship (that is, between people). In the Ten Commandments, the fundamental covenant treaty, the first four commandments deal with our relationship with God (the vertical dimension), the fifth on keeping the Sabbath is a transitional commandment. The sixth through tenth commandments move, then, to primarily human relationships (the horizontal dimension). The laws that follow the ratifying of that covenant (Exodus 20 and 24) all have to do with defining and laying out specific ways of *celebrating, maintaining and restoring* the covenant relationship between God and God's people and between persons within the covenant community.

The integral relationship between *hesed* and covenant is perhaps best illustrated by God's words and deeds described in Exodus 32-- 34. The Israelites had failed to keep their covenant commitments; the covenant had been broken. It could be expected, then, that God would be ready to destroy them as punishment. Moses, however, takes up his intercessory role as prophet and intercedes on their behalf. In response, God reveals God's basic character to Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 34:5-7). Along with other adjectives, *hesed* occurs twice in these verses: "abounding in steadfast love" and "keeping steadfast love." Note that while punishment/judgment extends to the third and fourth generation, *hesed* extends to the thousandth generation! This expresses God's abundant,

³⁷ The material that follows is distilled from "How we talk about God's Covenant Love" in *A Lukan Psalter* (op. cit.), pp. 32-34 including the direct use of the wording in that article written by the author of this book. It is based upon the insights shared with us by our Hebrew language consultant, Sr. Cheryl Anne Brown, OSF Ph.D.

overwhelming, amazing, completely gracious covenant love. Christians see the Mosaic Covenant as being fulfilled in the New Covenant; thus, for Christians, God's covenant love extends not only to Jews, but to *all* who enter into this covenant relationship with God and each other.

Why is this so important to our understanding of Sacrament as the foundation of a Lukan spirituality? I believe that the spirituality we seek has as its foundation and context the nature of God's covenant love as gracious, faithful, merciful, unending and steadfast. We find one summary of the covenant God shares with us in the words near the beginning of every Lukan Morning Prayer:

By Word and water,
God renews us this day
in the living fountain of God's grace
and raises us with Christ Jesus
to live a new life in the Spirit.
Remember your baptism and be thankful.³⁸

The baptismal covenant and every Eucharistic celebration bear witness to the steadfast love of our covenant God. That loving grace is already at work before we know it, before we share in the rituals shaped by God's lovingkindness. We seek to keep the vows we take, not out of mere obligation or a heartless sense of duty. We do so because we want to embody as fully as we can God's steadfast love which nurtures and supports and guides us as we walk the Way. We do this, not to earn God's favor, but to live out the implications of God's love.

God's love is not conditional; it is steadfast, enduring, unending. It is not judgmental; it is merciful, graciously extending forgiveness and mending brokenness. It does not come and go depending on our emotions or thoughts or actions of the moment; it is faithful. The concept of *hesed* can be a sacramental "word," a cipher of both mystery and meaning, reminding us of the steadfast love of our covenant God as the source, guide, and fulfillment of our life together, as we seek to embody a Lukan spirituality. As Lukans pray every Advent in response to the Seventh O Antiphon:

O Word fulfilling every word,
Oh God incarnate in our flesh!
Servant of Adonai and our promised King,
shepherd to lead us from our wandering;
law of the Covenant
no longer hid in awesome Ark apart,
You are become the Law of Love
cradled on woman's heart!
Emmanuel Expected One!
God-with-us now in Bread till time is done!
Oh God of all my longing, God-with-me,

³⁸ *The Book of Offices and Services*, op. cit., pp. 27-28

be all things to me now and all eternity!³⁹

Sacraments of the Church

In the last chapter we noted that celebrating the Eucharist helps us understand the Church as the Body of Christ. In later chapters we will explore an organic understanding of Eucharist and how appropriating the depth dimensions of the Baptismal Covenant can enable us to live a sacramental life. Baptism and Eucharist have been important parts of the Church's life since the days of the early Church, as a careful reading of the Acts of the Apostles makes clear.⁴⁰

The two central sacraments of the Church in most traditions have been, and continue to be, Baptism and Eucharist. For Roman Catholics and some other churches growing out of that tradition, there are also five additional sacraments: Confirmation, Penance (also known as Reconciliation), Anointing the Sick (formerly called Extreme Unction), Holy Orders, and Ordination. The same list of rites are known in Eastern Orthodox churches as Holy Mysteries.

In magnifying *the* sacraments, it is Baptism and Eucharist to which Lukans give primary attention. Both are means of grace through which we are incorporated into the paschal mystery. They interpret each other. Together they form us as the Body of Christ, the real presence of Christ in the world, and help us understand our identity and our mission.

For Alexander Schmemmann, the Eucharist is "*the* sacrament of the Church, i.e. her eternal actualization as the Body of Christ, united in Christ by the Holy Spirit."⁴¹ It is *relationship* with the risen Christ which is at stake, as Edward Schillebeeckx makes clear in this memorable passage:

[The Eucharist] takes the form of a commemorative meal in which the usual secular significance of the bread and wine is withdrawn and these become bearers of Christ's gift of himself — 'take and eat, this is my body.' Christ's gift of himself, however, is not ultimately directed toward bread and wine, but toward the faithful. . . . In this commemorative meal, bread and wine become the subject of a new *establishment of meaning*, not by [human beings] but by the living Lord *in* the Church, through which they become the sign of the real presence of Christ giving himself to us.⁴²

Celebration of the Eucharist is central to the life of the Order of Saint Luke. There is rarely a meeting of a chapter or association that does not include it and at meetings of the

³⁹ From "Meditations on the O Antiphons" by Sr. Jeremy Hall, OSB as found in *A Lukan Book of Feasts and Holy Days* (op. cit.), p. 33. Sr. Jeremy was one of the first two women to receive doctorates in connection with their studies with Dr. Bernard Cooke who pioneered a doctoral program in theology at Marquette University open to those not in the priesthood. Used with permission.

⁴⁰ For example, see Herman Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Guide to Liturgical History* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1985).

⁴¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), p. 24.

⁴² Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 151.

general chapter for retreat or at general council meetings, it is celebrated daily. Though dispersed, Lukans seek to find ways of sharing in celebrations of the Eucharist as frequently as possible. We will return to a more complete understanding of the Eucharist in chapter seven.

The Baptismal Covenant is also at the heart of a Lukan approach to liturgical spirituality and the sacramental life. We will explore the nature of that covenant more fully later, but here we want to note that “Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God’s people.”⁴³

Because Baptism and Eucharist were instituted and “commanded” by Jesus, we can call them “dominical sacraments” or “sacraments of Christ.” Confirmation can be seen as part of the baptismal covenant. Although Jesus uses foot washing as an example, indicating we should do likewise (John 13:1-14), it is not seen as a sacrament in contemporary practice in any Christian tradition as far as I can discover.⁴⁴ It is not recorded as being practiced by the apostles or anyone else in the emerging Christian community in Acts or the rest of the New Testament (though references to baptism and “breaking of bread” in remembrance of Christ are repeatedly made). Some make the case that Jesus gives an example and not a direct command. As a communal spiritual practice, it is commended and practiced, but it is not one of the sacraments of the Church. That is not to deny its sacramentality.

Then there are “apostolic sacraments,” as James F. White calls them: Reconciliation, Healing, and Ordination.⁴⁵ These are practices for which the New Testament gives evidence as having been practiced in the early church. In the services of the Order of Saint Luke, the first two are called “Pastoral Offices” and are what I call sacramental rites: Service of Prayer for Healing⁴⁶ and “Service of Prayer for Reconciliation.”⁴⁷ Rather than listing ordination as White does, I prefer referring to the setting apart of persons for life and service in special ways including the laying on of hands and invocation of the Holy Spirit as Vocational Consecrations. In addition to ordination, I would include as an apostolic sacramental rite the consecration to a religious life involving the taking of lifelong vows.

Finally, there are what White calls “Natural Sacraments.” This refers to rites surrounding natural life events like marriage and death, events which naturally occur in human communities. In traditions that do not practice infant baptism, I would include rites surrounding birth here (an

¹ ⁴³ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, 1982), p. 2.

⁴⁴ In Catholic practice it is known as “Mandatum” from the Latin word for commandment referring to Jesus commandment to love one another; Moravians call it Pedelavium (footbath); Anabaptists call it simply “feetwashing”. It is practiced as a part of Maundy Thursday services by Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and a number of Protestant denominations.

⁴⁵ James F. White, *op. cit.*, chapter 4.

⁴⁶ *Book of Office and Services*, *op. cit.*, pp. 67 ff. See the material below on pp. xxx-xxx.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 72 ff. See the material below on pp. xxx-xxx.

example being infant dedication). The Order has sought to meet the need for a sacramental rite surrounding death with a *Transitus* rite, another of our pastoral offices.⁴⁸

These dominical, apostolic and natural sacraments are observed through sacramental rites, each with its own rich and complex history. Our experience of them both helps us understand the meaning and mystery of the concept of Sacrament and can be enriched by our deeper understanding of the grove of meanings surrounding that concept.

Magnifying the Sacraments

“Magnifying the sacraments” may seem like strange language at first. After all, it is the sacraments which should nourish and form us. The sacraments magnify God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and as central acts of the Church at worship they should undergird our doing and our being as Christians. But what *ought* to be the case and what *is* in fact the case are not congruent! A Lukan approach to liturgical spirituality and the sacramental life demands that we give time and attention to reclaiming the role of the sacraments as essential to the life of the corporate Church and to the pilgrimage of faith for those who seek to follow Jesus.

If we accept the importance of the Eucharist and the Baptismal Covenant to the life of the Church as well as to the pilgrimage of faith, how can we help the congregation of which we are a part share in that reality? While during most of my life, I was a pastor, my life in retirement is mostly as a person in the pew. What does magnifying the sacraments mean for both presiders and the assembly?

I believe we need to start with an insistence that the celebration of the sacraments is not tangential to the life of the Church but at its very center. Our work in this area must be first and foremost *relational*. Celebration of the sacraments involves people — our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Their experiences and values must be taken into account. Magnifying the sacraments has to do with people, not just manipulating liturgical rites. Because the Church is *koinonia*, it must take relationships seriously. This does not mean trying to please everyone all the time, or being held hostage by a vocal minority. It does mean trying to understand what is at stake for other persons, taking context and local tradition seriously, honoring the deepest and richest experiences of sacramentality out of which we can work.

Another implication is that magnifying the sacraments is something for clergy and laity to do together. The importance of the sacraments is not something for clergy to foist upon laity without their support, nor are the sacraments to be seen as the possession of those entrusted with their celebration. The chief celebrants in any Eucharist or Baptismal Covenant service are not the “pastors” but the priests — and here I refer *to the priesthood of all believers*. All are celebrants; all are liturgists; all are priests. The presider does so on behalf of and for the sake of the whole assembly.

When one undertakes this work, whether as clergy or laity, one must be aware that one can be wrong even when one is doing things “right.” That is, if the community is torn apart rather than being built up, liturgical correctness is of little value. Strategizing the work of building up a

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-84. See the material below on pp. xxx-xxx.

sense of the importance of the sacraments involves knowing what one would like to have happen, how often, and in what way. If I had only my own values and understandings to consider, how would these celebrations take place? Having worked that out in my own mind (and recognizing that I am still growing and will likely change my mind!), I must then assess what is the most helpful thing to do in this particular context. This always involves some prioritizing. Are there some things which are non-negotiable? These are the things for which I would rather leave this congregation (whether as pastor or parishioner) rather than change. I believe the list of such things should be quite small, and even there, I should be open to the teaching of the Holy Spirit broadening my horizons as to what is truly important. But there will probably be some such things, and it will be better if I know what they are, although I don't broadcast the list!

Often there is considerable difference between what is and what I wish it were. I must then assess what changes can take place soon because others will be open to them; what changes will take time and education but may be possible; and which changes are unlikely ever to be productive and spiritually beneficial in this particular context. Alongside these, I must place the practices which are now taking place which I want to nurture, honor, and support. Some of these may be "transportable" to other settings; some will be unique to this setting. My own experience is that the longer I am in a particular congregation, the more I am surprised by the things which move from the "to-be-changed" list to the "to-be-kept-and-honored" list. What happens is that the Spirit gradually teaches me the deep meaning of practices which may at first seem superficial or inadequate. One must keep open even as one seeks growth in a congregation's sense of the sacraments.

Education and nurture are key ingredients to this growth. Across the age span, from young children to shut-ins and elders, we must seek ways to make the sacraments vital and significant for people and to help them reflect on their meaning for the life of faith and the nature of the Church. Teaching about the sacraments whenever and where-ever possible is a key strategy. Whether in teaching or preaching, one becomes increasingly sensitive to ways in which the Baptismal Covenant and the Eucharist provide images and illustrations of what Christian discipleship is all about. Gradually our thinking about discipleship and the nature of the Church become permeated with sacramental motifs.

Those entrusted with leadership in the celebration of the sacraments themselves must be approach preparation for them with care. On the one hand, we seek services which have Biblical, theological, and liturgical integrity. On the other hand, we want these services to be vital and alive, engaging us all in the grace and love and joy God is ready to pour out upon us. Thus we will take the rituals which have been carefully prepared by our denominational tradition seriously. We will get to know them inside-out — that is, to get beneath the surface and discover the dynamic which drives them. We will read about and study and experience them until they become part of our inner being.

But we will not be held in bondage by them. By learning their depth dynamic we will have the freedom to know when to depart from them, when and how to modify them, when to utilize the wider ecumenical resources available. We will resist the temptation to "do our own thing" without regard to the tradition. We will introduce The Great Thanksgiving with the traditional

Sursum Corda and have the community sing the *Sanctus*.⁴⁹ When we depart from what is provided, we will know why. When we use what is provided, we will do so with all the vitality and strength the Tradition deserves if it is to remain alive and relevant. We will seek opportunities for celebrating Eucharist and the Baptismal Covenant. In most congregations this will mean celebrating the Sacraments with greater frequency. In addition, we will seek to relate the sacraments to important times and transition points in the lives of individuals and congregations.

As pastors or members of a worship committee, we will pay particular attention to the interaction of the sacraments with the senses. We will always have a "fair linen" (even if it is only the size of a napkin) beneath the elements to remind us that this is a meal; the whiteness of the cloth signifying that the foundation of the Eucharist is God's grace. We will pour the water for the Baptismal Covenant so that it can be seen and heard. In whatever ways possible, we will focus attention on one loaf and a shared cup. We will let the "breaking of the bread" (the *fraction*) speak with integrity about the nature of the Church as the body of Christ.⁵⁰ We will seek to use the paschal candle when it is appropriate. We will avoid "cluttering" the holy space with too many things to distract us from the central symbols. Such, at least, is a part of my list!

Central to all that we do will be the clear intention that our goal is to provide for ourselves and others an increased openness to the nurture, strength, and understanding which the sacraments provide. We magnify the sacraments not in order to worship them, but in order that through them, we may worship the living God of grace who comes to us in Jesus Christ.

From Sacrament to Sacramentality and Back Again

Often a sacrament is thought of as something that breaks into otherwise secular experience. A Lukan perspective prefers to see sacrament as that which symbolizes and enables us to focus our awareness of God's presence in all of life. To state again from a different perspective what we said regarding the sacramental, in sacrament we have to do with unusually translucent experiences which reveal the transcendent and transformative reality which is much deeper beyond them. Even things of ordinary life can become channels of God's presence mediated through the created world. As the Welsh poet David Jones says: "things of all sort can, are, and should be given special significances, set aside, made other."⁵¹

We need to be aware of the possibility of "watering down" a sense of sacramentality until it becomes a general but fuzzy sense of appreciation. Having such a sense is a good thing, but it lacks the significance that utilizing the concept of sacrament can have in our meaning making. As David Jones noted, it must be "made other."

Our daughter lives near the shore of Lake Michigan where seemingly normal, grey rocks may be found containing sodalite. In one of the Christmas stockings opened by our family this year there was a kind of flashlight which can shine UV light on these rocks, revealing vibrant orange

⁴⁹ See pp. xxx-xxx for further information.

⁵⁰ See pp. xxx-xxx for further information.

⁵¹ As quoted by Nathan Mitchell in *Meeting Mystery* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), p. 266.

and yellow colors.⁵² This is especially effective at night when full attention can be given them. Just as an ordinary rock is transformed when a certain light shines on it, so once we have understood the deep and rich meaning of Sacrament, we can use the term for the grove of meaning it carries to open doors so we may be grasped by holiness from God, the Giver who Encompasses all. Sacramental meaning and mystery is thus made known in finite people and things and places and stories and sacramental rites. For Jones, this involves "sign-making, a showing forth . . . that binds us to *signs* . . . a showing forth of the invisible under visible signs."⁵³ This is the strong sense of the word "signs" which we have reserved for symbols.

Here's Pastor Steve Garnass-Holmes's way of putting it

You listen,
as the forest listens to the wind,
as the ocean hears the river.
You listen to someone, not just their speaking
but their being.
Your listening is a door,
through which they enter you.
The more fully, openly, spaciouly you listen,
the more of them comes in,
what they're saying and not saying,
and can't say, what they may not even know
until they hear it being heard.
The door that is your listening becomes
the whole space, a house, a temple.
It holds the world.

In this temple, beneath the words,
beneath the cries and silences,
you hear the voice of God—
without words, a wind. A music,
enveloping all, the full sound.
In someone's story, even their pain,
is the world's vast joy and agony.
In your listening the whole sanctuary
resounds with the glory of God.⁵⁴

⁵² These rocks are known officially as Yooperlites, a reference to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where they are frequently found on the shores of Lake Superior as well as other Great Lakes.

⁵³ As cited in Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

⁵⁴ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light*, www.unfoldinglight.net. Used with permission.

Finally, you see, when we think of Sacrament, we are not only concerned with remembering Jesus' own prayer of thanksgiving at the Last Supper, or even offering up a Great Thanksgiving Prayer at the holy meal, important and essential as those things are. What we discover is that the power of God is at work within us, teaching us to live all of life eucharistically, that is, within the context of thanksgiving,⁵⁵ and to understand our discipleship as a living out of the Baptismal Covenant. Both are part of the rich matrix of meaning and mystery, ciphers of the Great Encompassing we call God. We are to live as those who find their identity through lifting up our hearts — indeed our very lives — to God. It becomes natural for us to give thanks and praise to God in everything (see Philippians 4:6), to present ourselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1). We become a people upon whom the Holy Spirit is poured out with power to enable our ministry in Christ's name.

As sacramental symbols in our meaning making, the incarnation of God in Christ as well as the Eucharist and Baptism are epiphanies of the invisible through the visible. As such, they participate in that toward which they point, the "other" to which Jones refers. Here insight (which we consider to be *our* action) meets epiphany (a "showing forth" from beyond ourselves). What happened for Isaiah in a liturgical space while "doing" liturgy becomes the basis for Daniel Berrigan's reflections:

This is the truth of our condition, verified on every hand. Blind, deaf, and worst of all, heartless, our depredations, the stench of blood, are evident across the world. Only fire can cleanse our lips and waken the sleepwalker. Hence Isaiah, touched by flame from the altar's burning coals, becomes the measure of our own possibility of seeing, hearing, understanding with the heart, of being healed against all odds, Against the crushing odds death holds, the "holy" lives in Isaiah and in those who, like him, take the word of God seriously. Thus the fire of godliness is passed on and on. A community, a circle about the fire, is not merely warmed by the fire, but touched by the fire, marked indelibly.⁵⁶

The "Other" isn't some fuzzy mystical "beyond" for the pilgrim community walking in the way of Jesus. For us, it is "the surprising Other of a God who is revealed in self-emptying love."⁵⁷ This, too, is not an abstract concept. We inherit a narrative of a people called by God whose very name implies passionate presence with them and whose steadfast love becomes central to their praise and witness. Into this grove of meanings come more stories about that revealing love, stories of a manger birth, shared meals, a convict's cross, a borrowed tomb, and a wind-filled room. There sacramental symbols are located right here in this messy world with its injustice and suffering and pain. The importance of the sacraments and the daily office to our life in the Order provide a focus in which the "flashlight" of Sacrament meets us over and over

⁵⁵ See Don E. Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*, Second ed. (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 1996), chapter five, especially pp. 62-68.

⁵⁶ Daniel Berrigan: *Isiah: Spirit of Courage, Gift of Tears* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 33. See Isaiah 6:1-6.

⁵⁷ Davud N. Power, op. cit, p.307.

Gordon Lathrop reminds us that the crucified One who shares the hunger and woundedness of the world is also the risen One who is the living bread who feeds all who come to him. God's spirit forms us into a people who can trust this "God of open hands" so that "whatever wilderness we are in also has green grass, also lies around us as holy ground. Whatever the sea storms, the crucified Risen One is the presence of God's own 'I AM,'"⁵⁸

The sacraments reveal a dynamic basic to living the sacramental life, involving both grace and faith. Indeed, they recognize both the steadfast love of a passionately present God *and* the sign-acts of a faith community. Having offered all that we have and are up to God in response to that amazing grace, we receive it all back again renewed and empowered. In all of life, we take and eat with thanksgiving, being nourished so that we can become the people we are called to be.

Veni, Sancte Spiritus! Come, Holy Spirit; make yourself known in and to and through us as we seek to live as sacraments of *the* sacraments of *THE* Sacrament of God's self-giving, even Jesus the Christ!

⁵⁸ Gordin W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 208.